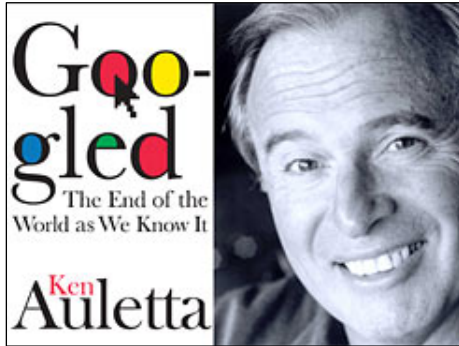


Ken Auletta, **Googled: The End of the World as We Know It**, Penguin Press, 2009, 384 pp., \$27.95 (hardcover), \$12.95 (paperback).

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It would be hard to overestimate not just how much but how *quickly* Google has transformed the digital world. In 1999, no one outside of a few Silicon Valley venture capitalists knew who Larry Page and Sergey Brin were. Just 11 years later, the company they started out of a California garage is one of the world's most trusted brands, with an estimated worth of about \$150 billion and a large portfolio of products considered indispensable by millions around the world.

It would be just as difficult, however, to pin down exactly what Google has become, at least as a business. Gmail, Google Maps, Google News, and Google Docs may all be useful, but they don't fit together into a cohesive vision. In fact, many of Google's products lose money. Despite raking in billions each year, 98% of the company's revenue still comes from advertising, mostly little four-line text ads.

Ken Auletta, a veteran author who has covered media for the *New Yorker* since 1992, began knocking on Google's door several years ago to get some answers. It took a while to convince the normally secretive company to open up, but eventually he managed to obtain an unprecedented level of cooperation. Drawing upon 13 weeklong trips to its headquarters and some 150 Google interviews, including 11 with CEO Eric Schmidt and several with the founders, Auletta presents a rich, comprehensive history of the company. He also pulls heavily from his contacts, conducting 150 additional interviews with top media executives and Silicon Valley luminaries for outside commentary.

With that access and the hindsight possible now that Google has settled into adulthood, Auletta is able to weave a more cohesive narrative than many other biographies of the company. And what he finds at the heart of the story is the mindset of the engineer. The same love of algorithms and efficiency that led Page and Brin to Stanford University's graduate school persists today in Google's lionization of its technical employees and computer scientists, who command better salaries, get more free time to work on their own projects, and are constantly encouraged to push boundaries. "Google is run by engineers, and engineers are people who ask why: Why must we do things the way they've always been done?" Auletta writes. "Google's leaders are not cold businessmen; they are cold engineers" (p. xii). It is this continued disregard for tradition—especially when it intrudes on the fortunes of more established media players—that gives the book its apocalyptic subtitle.

Much of Google's initial success, for instance, can be attributed largely to Page and Brin's uncompromising, engineering-driven vision to build the best possible search engine *for users*, as contrasted with the portal-centric models of earlier search businesses. This notion extends far beyond the pair's key technical creation, the PageRank algorithm that ranks the relevance of Web sites based on the sites linking to them. It also means that Google's home page always has been and still remains ad free, that advertisers cannot pay for search priority, and that ads still occupy a small portion of the results displays.

This same engineering mindset ties together Google's seemingly haphazard pattern of growth. According to Marissa Mayer, Google's vice president of search products and user experience, "in Google's way of looking at the world . . . any product that simplifies a task for consumers better delivers 'the world's information' to them" (p. 255). Google still may consider itself a search company, but one with a mandate so broad as to include almost anything. Indeed, in addition to entering areas such as social networking, cloud computing, and geospatial information systems, Google has also invested in renewable energy, health informatics, and other non-computer-related areas. According to Page, "If you can solve search, you can answer any question. Which means you can basically do anything" (p. 322).

Auletta makes some strange choices in his early chapters. Eight pages, for instance, are dedicated to Bill Campbell, a Silicon Valley executive known as "the coach" who is called in to smooth tensions between Schmidt, Brin, and Page. But only two pages explain how Google secured its first million dollars in seed funding—a huge 2002 advertising deal with America Online that could have sunk the fledgling company is likewise treated in swift fashion. Still, Auletta's exhaustive interviewing and keen journalistic ear means this initial history is lively and entertaining.

Unfortunately, no matter how polished the prose, there's not much new to this part of the story. The company's early days have been treated in numerous articles and several books. Often, with fewer years to cover, these works provide greater insight into key areas. If you want to know more about the technology of search, the advertising model that generates Google's money, or the company's rocky initial public offering, for instance, John Battelle's *The Search* (Battelle, 2005) is an excellent entry point.

Where Auletta, as the newcomer to the Google book party, might really be expected to shine is the firm's more recent history. Here, however, his comprehensive take becomes a shortcoming. Just as many traditional media companies were left stunned as Google, cash-flush after its IPO, began rapidly expanding into new areas of media, Auletta also seems to struggle under the sheer scope of the company's ambition.

Even a cursory list of Google's actions since 2005 reveals the challenges of writing about the company in any systematic fashion. Auletta dashes, for instance, from the legal brouhaha over Google's plans to digitize books to the company's acquisition and quest to monetize YouTube to controversies over Chinese censorship of the Internet. He outlines numerous acquisitions, product launches, and forays into new business areas, as well as financial developments and changes to the company's culture and philosophy. Issues of privacy, and the failures of Google engineers to grasp the full extent of popular and governmental concerns about privacy, become a repeated motif, especially after Google gains additional

sources of personal information and enters the cell phone market. So it's no wonder that many topics, such as Google's investment in a massive computing infrastructure and its development of Google Earth, receive only cursory treatment. There is simply no way to match the detailed discussion found in books that cherry-pick such threads, such as Randall Stross' *Planet Google* (Stross, 2008).

Auletta's background also works against him here. As Google's voracious appetite causes it to expand into more and more areas, the storied newsman cannot resist the urge to turn the story of the company into the story of media as a whole. Thus, much of the book's latter half details the reactions of the entertainment conglomerates and software companies whose fortunes decline in lockstep with Google's rise. Significant coverage also goes to the digital start-ups that similarly push back against the company. Auletta evocatively captures much of the escalating tension by turning to war metaphors: a "skirmish" between Google and the advertising industry (p. 173), "shadow boxing" with Facebook (p. 224), even a Google comparison to Napoleon, riling all the old powers at once (p. 242). But no matter how deftly he handles this back and forth, the expansion in scope further chips away at the depth of his discussion.

There's still much of value in these chapters. Auletta is impressively connected, and in the latter half of his book he makes particularly savvy use of those contacts, firing off an array of interesting quotes that accurately capture many of the central issues surrounding a mature Google. For those interested in frank reactions to the company's rise to power, there's probably no better source than *Googled*. In doing so, however, Auletta also reveals what is perhaps his book's biggest weakness. Increasingly, he spins a yarn about insiders told by insiders—and largely loses his own voice. For example, it is former Intel chairman and CEO Andy Grove, not Auletta, who worries that Google's vaunted "Don't be evil" motto is "too vague" and "smacked of self-righteousness" (p. 75). Former Microsoft executive Nathan Myhrvold, meanwhile, is left to raise the provocative possibility that Google's AdWords cash cow was "pirated" from the company Overture (p. 90).

These issues reveal themselves most obviously in the final two chapters of *Googled*, where Auletta discusses the future of traditional media and Google, respectively. With so many issues to cover, very few garner lengthy or nuanced investigation. And again the most cogent comments come not from Auletta, but from those he interviewed. A cacophony of voices opines about Google, its leaders, and its trajectory, but Auletta's own views barely register.

It may seem strange to chastise Auletta for hewing so closely to his journalistic roots. Perhaps because the technology is moving so fast, most recent chroniclers of major online players pass on substantial prognostication. Despite similar inside access, Andrew Lih's *The Wikipedia Revolution* (Lih, 2009) limits its predictions to five pages and an experimental group-edited epilogue; Julia Angwin's *Stealing MySpace* (Angwin, 2009) is a straightforward history of the company. But it doesn't always have to be that way. The best reporters can dig up hidden truths and deliver lasting analysis—not just tell a good story. As dated as some of Battelle's book has become, his exploration of search's future possibilities is still fascinating and relevant. It's hard not to be disappointed that, despite more experience, more resources, and more access, Auletta achieves less.

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